

BANNER

Circ.: e. 97,949

Front Page Edit Page Other Page

NOV 21 1958

Date:

Plea For Understanding: What Americans Forget About The Arab

(Editor's Note: The following article is by George M. Mardikian, San Francisco civic leader, host to foreign students and dignitaries, and owner of the world-famous restaurant, Omar Khayyam's. Author of "Song of America," in which he tells the memorable story of his Americanization, he has been devoted as a private American "ambassador of good will" in the Middle East and has been awarded the highest decorations of a number of the Arab countries. This article first appeared in the November issue of the Reader's Digest and is reproduced by The Banner with the permission of the copyright owner, The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.)

By GEORGE M. MARDIKIAN

LAST JULY, in Cairo, I had the heartalckening feeling that we had lost the friendship of 50 million Arabs in the Middle East and perhaps aroused the hostility of 300 million Moslems stretching from Morocco to Indonesia and the Philippines. Our loss could be the Soviet Union's greatest gain. It seemed the tragedy of China all over again, with the American people unaware of what was happening and unlikely to awaken to the grim facts until too late.

When I returned to the United States, the attitude of the American people appalled me. They seemed convinced that the Arabs

and their leaders were pro-Communists or avowed Reds. Gamal Abdel Nasser a Soviet stooge on a scheming demagogue. Reading the American press, the Arab world could reach but one conclusion: the Americans once the Arabs' idols and friends, had abandoned them.

Since then the crisis in the Middle East has had a sobering effect, and the American people have begun to ask questions. What is really going on in the Arab world? Why the tide of anti-Americanism? Is Nasser dangerous, or is he the sincere leader of the Arab people? If he is the Arabs' chosen leader, can we learn to live with him?

I think I understand the Arabs' problems, even though I am an average American citizen who has had a better-than-average opportunity to know the Middle East. I was born there (it was called the Near East in those days) of Armenian parents at a time when the Arabs and Armenians lived under the oppressive rule of the Ottoman Empire. Before I emigrated to the United States in 1922, at the age of 19, the only hope and inspiration I knew came from the American teachers, doctors and workers of the Near East Relief.

So, from early childhood, I have known two things rooted deeply in the Arab's nature: an

abiding hatred of imperialism, born of centuries of oppression and exploitation; and an undying aspiration to freedom and independence symbolized by the United States of America. For nearly 30 years I have been an American citizen, and America has been good to me. I have tried to repay part of this debt by telling the American story to eager listeners in other parts of the world, especially in the Arab lands. But during these years, and particularly since 1945, I have seen the Arab reaction of a slow, steady, unrelenting

First, as much as we in the United States have been

ing for self-government. During World War I they were promised their independence by the British in return for fighting with the Allies against the Turks. After the Armistice came disillusionment. The Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire were carved up into separate states mandated to the British and the French. But the Arabs have never wanted their freedom as separate states; most of them have always visualized their future as one independent Arab nation, united by common language, history and traditions, and patterned after the U. S. A.

After 1915 the cry for independence grew louder in the Arab world. It was the

ject peoples everywhere. Unfortunately the United States chose that time to soft-pedal its belief in the right of self-determination for all people; our allies—the British, French and Dutch—were having trouble with their colonies, and we tried not to make things worse. I attempted to convince our Arab friends that America's historic policies remained unchanged, as we moved by a surprising independence to the Philippines in 1946. But the Soviet Union, labeled the United States an "imperialist" power, and its propagandists had been busy in the Middle East, as we were.

Then, on March 29, 1948, an unusual alliance of the United States and the Soviet Union, voted 33 to 13 (with Britain and nine others abstaining) to partition Palestine and set up the State of Israel as of October 1, 1948. The Arab states denounced the vote as a violation of the UN charter, warned of the dire consequences that would follow, and walked out.

On March 19, 1948, the United States, in a surprise move, recommended that the plan be extended, and that a special session of the UN General Assembly be called to reopen the debate. Leaders in the State Department, Central Intelligence

Agency and National Security Council had become convinced that creation of the State of Israel would result in bloodshed and years of turmoil in the Middle East. The hope now was to place Palestine under a UN mandate.

But in May Israel jumped the gun and proclaimed herself an independent state. A few hours

later President Truman recognized the provisional Jewish government in Palestine as the "de facto authority of the State of Israel." Recognition came from the Soviet Union two days later.

Many farsighted individuals spoke out in opposition. Albert Einstein, for example, stated in his book, *Out of My Later Years*: "I should much rather see a reasonable agreement with the Arabs on the basis of living together than the creation of a Jewish state."

World

Virginia C. Gildersleeve, former Dean of Barnard College and an authority on the Middle East, wrote: "Surprisingly few Americans knew anything about the background of this tragic situation. The spotlight of publicity had been focused so brightly by the Zionists on their plan for Palestine that, to many of our citizens, the rest of the Middle East was shrouded in darkness. Of the few who had any real knowledge of the circumstances, almost no one was

and to speak out publicly against the Zionists. The politicians feared the Jewish vote; others feared the charge of anti-Semitism; and nearly all had a kind of guilt complex in their emotions toward the Jews because of the terrible tragedies inflicted by Hitler."

Dean Gildersleeve was one of the few Americans who foresaw this situation. In 1945 she wrote a letter which was published in the New York Times, speaking out against attempts to force the Arabs to admit homeless Jews. Many Zionists denounced her vehemently for this letter; some threatened violence. "Most of my Jewish friends, on the other hand, were in favor of my views," she reported.

Said CBS commentator Howard K. Smith: "We felt the need of a new home that the persecuted Jews could go to. We overlooked the fact that we chose someone else's home to give."

The Arabs, like most people, have short memories. They for-

Cont'd